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Student activists in the US attend the best colleges and universities, approximate the intellectual and ethical ideals of their professors, and have experienced the affluence and security provided by post-industrial society. Their current moralistic protest concentrates on the Vietnam war and racism in the US. They are most dissatisfied with war-related university policies and administrative response to political pressures and not with the quality or relevance of their education in itself. On a world-wide basis, student activists are searching for new values that involve an identification with the process of social and personal change and emphasize openness, mobility, fluidity, and continuous self-transformation. They also feel that existing society is hypocritical, outmoded, oppressive, unworthy of respect, in urgent need of reform, and suffering from symptoms of exhaustion. The problem in the US may be that society has exceeded its earlier goals and, lacking new goals, has become exhausted by its own success. With the loss of a moral imperative behind production, acquisition, materialism, and abundance, modern society does not inspire an implicit sense of allegiance, fidelity and moral respect in its most affluent, idealistic, and talented youth. Future historians may say that today's dissenting students were right in pointing to the need for a radical restructuring of society and its institutions. (WM)

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Fourth Plenary Session: The Student Ferment
Thursday, December 5, 2:00 p.m.

PRESIDING: Alvin H. Proctor, *Chairman-Elect, Council of Graduate Schools*

Kenneth Keniston, *Yale University*
David B. Truman, *Columbia University*

Kenneth Keniston

AN ANALYSIS OF DISSENT

I confess to a great hestitation in offering any analysis of dissent to this audience. For one, your individual and cumulative experience in the care and feeding of student dissenters enormously outweighs my own. And for another, I come from one of the few institutions in American higher education which has—so far—been relatively tranquil. I am never sure whether we owe our tranquility to divine intervention, to our chaplain, to our administration, or to a conservative student body. And every time I publicly seek explantions for it, I expect to return to New Haven to find University Hall burned to the ground. Furthermore, I feel almost apologetic in noting the absence of disruptive confrontations, sit-ins, and movements for liberation in my own Alma Mater, since, as I will point out, the *presence* of such demonstrations is a very good rough index of institutional quality. Like you, I remain puzzled by many aspects of student dissent, and my comments, although couched in dogmatic terms, in fact reflect the dogmatism that comes from bewilderment.

Two overlapping approaches to the problem of student unrest have most interested me. The first is empirical. It is an attempt to answer the question, Who are the student rebels? What do they want? What motivates them? The second approach is speculative, and socio-historical. It is an effort to answer the question, What psychological, social, and historical conditions, if any, unite student protests the world over? How can we explain the extraordinary unrest exhibited last spring in more than twenty nations of the world?

With regard to the first question, Who are student demonstrators?, there have been many studies of American student activists, radicals, and

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demonstrators that permit a fairly definitive description of the student protestors. The results of these studies are amazingly consistent, and similar findings are reached by a great variety of investigators operating in very different institutions with very different methods. The results can be summarized by noting that student radicals and activists in America are in almost every respect an elite group. For one, given the fact that more than six million young Americans attend colleges and universities, activists are a small minority, estimated at between 5 and 10 percent of all American college and university students. They are disproportionately concentrated at the institutions of highest educational scholarly quality—for example, at those American universities represented here at this meeting. At the great majority of the more than eighteen hundred institutions of higher education in America, there have been *no* student protests, demonstrations, or disturbances. The presence of disruption, strikes, and student activism is not only an index of the educational quality but, interestingly enough, of the freedom allowed by any given institution. With many local variations, the same tends to be true in other nations: student radicals and activists tend to be concentrated at the major national universities and to be found rather less frequently at provincial institutions of lesser quality.

A great variety of studies of the personal characteristics and backgrounds of student activists in America also yield remarkably consistent results. The typical activist comes from a family whose parents are themselves left of center. His parents usually are sympathetic, in principle if not in practice, with his radicalism, although they are less radical themselves. Liberal college professors, other intellectuals, and artists produce a disproportionate number of student activists, while the merchandising trades produce disproportionately few. They are the privileged children, in general, of affluent, upper-middle-class families; their parents are well educated; and they have never known personal poverty or political insecurity. Thus, any simple view of generational conflict, rebellion, and discontinuity has been clearly refuted by the data from American studies.

Intellectually and ethically, student protesters, radicals, and activists also constitute an elite group. They do extremely well academically, are well thought of by their professors, tend to have closer personal relationships with the faculty members than do their non-activist classmates, and hold a strongly intellectual and anti-vocational conception of higher education. Ethically as well, student activists appear to be an elite group with a highly developed conception of ethical responsibility centering around concepts of social justice and human dignity. In this regard, once again, they contrast very sharply with their non-activist fellow students. There is also some evidence that such activist students appear to be more ad-

vanced developmentally (more independent, more self-directing) than their classmates. And there is no evidence that as a group they manifest more psychological problems, greater generalized rebelliousness, or any special psychopathology.

Still another finding deserves special emphasis. Student rebels are not, in America, distinctively dissatisfied with the quality or relevance of their education *per se*. Indeed, as a group, because of their intellectual orientation and superior talents, they tend to receive more individual attention and better instruction than do their classmates. Fewer drop out and more go on to graduate schools, especially in the arts and sciences. Approximately 85 percent of all American college students indicate general satisfaction with their college or university experience. The proportion of student radicals and non-radicals does not differ.

But what *does* distinguish the activist from the non-activist is his view of the University Hall, as many of you here can no doubt testify from personal experience. Activists are considerably more mistrustful of college administrators and are much more likely to perceive the university administration as excessively responsive to political pressures. Even more important, student activists in America are uniquely sensitive to two critical issues: American foreign policy, especially in Southeast Asia, and the direct and indirect racism that remains in American society. A study conducted last year of seventy-three student demonstrations showed that in sixty-nine racism or war-related university policies were the occasion for the demonstrations. At Columbia, of course, both of these issues were combined.

Thus, whatever the complaints of American college radicals concerning the university, these complaints are largely directed against the purportedly reactionary or conservative policies of the administration, and not primarily against the faculty or against the quality of instruction at the university. Furthermore, there have been very few student demonstrations whose sole focus in America has been upon exclusively intramural issues. (The demonstrations at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964 are notable exceptions.) The cry of "student power" has so far been chiefly directed at issues like university involvement in war-related research or recruiting and university policies that touch upon racial relations. Whatever the rhetoric of students concerning the restructuring of the university, the main issues around which widespread support can be mobilized in America are Vietnam and racism.

On the face of it, these results may seem paradoxical. But I suspect that to the student of revolution, they will seem very familiar. They are paradoxical only if we assume that dissent is a characteristic of the most oppressed and that it is most vociferous where conditions are worst. Clearly,

in American society, the student rebels are drawn from the least deprived, the most affluent, those who attend the best universities and colleges, and those who have the most stimulating relationships with faculty members. The cause of student unrest is clearly *not,* in America, personal deprivation, oppression, and hardship. Student protest does, however, spring from the sense of *moral outrage* in a group of highly moral and at times moralistic students and is at present especially concentrated on the two issues of the war in Vietnam and the legacy of racism in America. My own view is that the most important distinction between the activist and the non-activist is a distinction in the quality of his ethical thinking and passion; as I noted, empirical research indicates clearly that activists approach ethical questions in a less egocentric and conventional manner, paying instead greater attention to abstract ethical principle as a criterion for judging social action, whether their own or that of others.

The most general conclusion to be reached from these studies, I believe, is that if we were to search for those students within American higher education who come closest to meeting the ideals of American educators, who have experienced most fully the affluence and security which American post-industrial society provides to its more fortunate members, who have assimilated most completely the lessons of our educational system, we would point precisely to the activist group. By almost every index, student radicals and activists must be judged the successes, not the failures, of American society. This fact, I believe, has important implications for our understanding the broader meaning of student unrest.

In turning to the second question—the factors, if any, that unite student protests across the world—we are initially impressed with the enormous variety and diversity of student discontent. In each nation in the world, the focus is different and often radically so; in Czechoslavakia, dissatisfaction with the heavy hand of a neo-Stalinist regime; in France, complaints over archaic university practices; in Germany, resentment against the monopolistic role of a conservative publisher; in Brazil, protest against a military dictatorship; in Chile, discontent and resentment of American imperialist influences and university conditions. On the face of it, there is little that unites these protests. The theory of an international conspiracy, network, or organization that manipulates student protests is completely without basis in fact. At first, the only unifying thread among student demonstrations appears to be the ubiquitious influence of the mass media, especially television, in transmitting instantaneously from continent to continent the patterns, styles, slogans, and action of one student group to students in other nations.

But having said all of this, we still search for an explanation. For despite the impressive differences between student protestors in different nations,

we also see communalities in style, in ideology (or more precisely, non-ideology), in spirit, in heroes, and, at times, even in slogans. Having pointed out the important role of national character, conditions, and culture in each student revolt, we remain puzzled and unconvinced that student unrest reflects merely the interaction of local conditions and worldwide television.

What protesting students share on a worldwide basis is a mood more than an ideology or a program—a mood that says that the existing system, the establishment, is hypocritical, wanting, unworthy of respect, outmoded, irrelevant, and in urgent need of reform. In addition, the complaint of repression, manipulation, and authoritarianism is ubiquitous, although paradoxical, given the apparently great freedoms enjoyed by students in many nations and the fact that in America those who complain most loudly about being suffocated by the subtle tyranny of the university or society attend the institutions where freedom is in fact greatest. Around this general mood, specific complaints arrange themselves as symptoms of what students often call the "exhaustion of the existing society."

To understand this phenomenon, we must recognize that during the decade since the second World War a number of societies have begun to move past the industrial era into a new era that is post-industrial, technological, post-modern, post-historic, or, in Brzyzinski's terms, "technetronic." In western Europe, the Scandinavian nations, United States and Canada, and Japan, the first contours of this post-modern society are already apparent. And in many other societies, middle-class professionals (whose children become activists) also live in a post-industrial milieu. Whatever we call this new kind of society, it has demonstrated that for the first time in history man can produce far more than is necessary to meet his material needs. This accomplishment is admittedly blemished by enormous problems of economic distribution in the advanced nations, and it is in marked contrast to the overwhelming and in many cases growing poverty of the Third World. Nevertheless, for the first time in world history, it has become clear that what might be called "the problem of production" *can,* in principle, be solved. If all members of American society, for example, do not have enough material goods, this is only because the system of distribution is flawed. The same is true, or will soon be true, in a number of other nations that are approaching advanced states of industrialization—characteristically, these nations, along with the most technological, are those where student unrest has been most prominent.

The transition from industrial to post-industrial society brings with it a major shift in social emphasis. Industrializing and industrial societies, whatever their political organization, tend to be oriented toward solving the problem of production. An industrial ethic—sometimes Protestant, sometimes socialist, sometimes communist—tends to emphasize psychological

qualities like self-discipline, delay of gratification, achievement-orientation, and a strong emphasis on economic success and productivity. The social, political, and economic institutions of industrializing and industrial societies tend to be organized in a way that is consistent with the goal of increasing production. For example, as Marx first noted, work assumes a very different psychological place in such societies than in earlier peasant or craft societies. As many others have noted, industrial societies tend to apply universalistic or uniform standards, to reward achievement rather than status acquired by birth, to emphasize emotional neutrality ("coolness") in work and public life. Because they are oriented to the problem of production, industrial societies have tended to produce a distinctive cluster of psychological qualities, cultural values, and social institutions.

The emergence of post-industrial societies, however, means that growing numbers of youths are brought up in family environments where abundance, economic security, and affluence (the consequences of high production) are simply facts of life, not goals to be striven for. To such young men and women, the social institutions and cultural values of the industrial ethic seem largely outdated and irrelevant to their own life situations.

So, too, the psychological goals and orientations that support an industrial economy seem to many of the young exhausted, outworn, and unnecessary. When the young perceive that the problem of production can be solved, they become unresponsive, bored, or "turned off" by values, institutions, and psychological demands that originate in a society where production is crucial. Once it has been demonstrated that a society *can* produce more than enough for all of its members, at least some of the young turn to other goals; for example, trying to make sure that society *does* produce enough and distributes it fairly, or else searching for outlooks that will enable them to live meaningfully with the goods and the leisure they *already* have.

Throughout the world, then, the more affluent sectors of university youth are becoming less loyal to the culture, the institutions, and the psychological imperatives of industrial society. And with this loss of enthusiasm for the old order comes an upsurge of old humanistic values and a search for new values. The older values of the industrial ethic occupy a lower place in today's youth's hierarchy of values. And a more important place in this hierarchy is now taken by humanitarian, romantic, and self-actualizing goals, which, while they have always been a part of the Western tradition, have never before been taken seriously by any very large group of people.

In addition to the renewed importance given to old values, today's restless youth is involved in a visible search for new values appropriate to the post-industrial world. These new values involve a profound identification with the process of social and personal change: openness, mobility, fluidity, and continual self-transformation are stressed. As exemplified in America

by the hippies, there is a new focus on internal malleability, self-transformation, and the expansion of consciousness, often with the assistance of modern psycho-chemistry. In many ways, the hippies and their equivalents in other nations can be seen as a vanguard of a new culture of leisure readily foreseeable in the advanced nations with the lowering of the work week. Perhaps the hippies, "voluntary dropouts," are among those preparing the way for the day when most Americans will be "involuntary force-outs" from the productive process.

Some American students today argue that fundamentally our society has failed. I am arguing the opposite. The problem, as I see it, is that our society has succeeded, in some realms, far beyond all expectation. It has exceeded its earlier goals, and, lacking new goals, has become exhausted *by its success.* As a result, even though material conditions are in many respects better than ever before in world history, this era brings an unprecedented and surprising upsurge of student protest and unrest.

But this upsurge follows very naturally from the exhaustion through success of the values of production. When the values and institutions of industrial society becomes devitalized for the young, the elite sectors of youth—the most affluent, intelligent, privileged, and so on—come to feel that they live in institutions whose imperatives lack moral authority, or, in the jargon of today's student, "credibility." The moral imperative behind production, acquisition, materialism, and abundance has been lost. The representatives of an older order are thus seen as irrelevant, corrupt, and lacking ethical substance or strength.

Furthermore, given the felt lack of moral legitimacy of what is viewed as "The System," the least request for loyalty, restraint, or conformity by its representatives—for example, by college presidents and deans—is viewed as a moral outrage, an authoritarian repression, or a manipulative co-optation. Thus, I suggest that the vague feeling of oppression voiced by so many students springs from their feeling that the existing society has lost its ethical mandate and credibility, so any request from that society is an exercise in "illegitimate authority" and must be exposed and resisted. And perhaps that peculiar sense of suffocation felt by dissenting students arises ultimately from living in societies without vital ethical claims.

My arguments can be summarized in three phrases: (1) The solution in principle of the problem of production; (2) The exhaustion through success of the industrial order; (3) The consequent decline in ethical legitimacy of the established order and its representatives. Given these three trends, many students perceive requests for obedience, restraint, or commitment from the part of established institutions and their representatives as trivial, stupid, hypocritical, or a deprivation of the freedom of the individual. What unites student demonstrations the world over, in the more advanced and in the

somewhat less advanced nations, in the communist and non-communist world, is the sense that the old values and structures are exhausted, have outlived their mandate and usefulness, no longer deserve respect, and are therefore illegitimate and oppressive.

Given a situation in which the older values and their representatives are experienced as irrelevant, it does not take that much to trigger off a major protest. I doubt that school, college, and university administrators are in fact greatly *more* hypocritical and dishonest than they were in the past. American intervention in Vietnam, while many of us find it unjust, outrageous and cruel, is not in itself vastly *more* outrageous than other similar imperialistic interventions by America and other nations within the last century. And the position of blacks in this nation, although disastrously and unjustifiably disadvantaged, is materially and legally better than ever before. Similarly, the conditions of students themselves in America has never been so good, especially at those elite colleges where student protests are most common. But this is precisely the point. It is *because* things are good or, more precisely, because many of the *other* problems of American society seem to have been resolved in principle that students can react with new indignation to existing injustices, turn to new goals, and propose radical reforms.

There are times in world history when things happen that have never happened before. The era of the French and American Revolutions was such a time. They marked the end of one phase of history and the beginning of a new one. These two revolutions were, in a sense, storm squalls on the weather front of historical change, the turbulence that marked the beginning of the era of industrialization. Although student unrest today and student unrest in the past have many similarities, I would submit that student unrest today—world-wide, moralistic, filled with a sense of the exhaustion of the old order—marks the ending of a historical era. I do not see this next era as inevitably more progressive or more humane. And I am well aware that what is happening in the advanced nations is not happening in the underdeveloped nations and that the gap between them is widening. Furthermore, the corrosive pace of social change leaves behind increasing numbers of Americans who are estranged from the status quo in a different way than students and whose estrangement may give this post-industrial era nightmarish political and cultural contours. I am only arguing that we are moving from an era geared to solving the problem of material production to another era whose goals are still not clear, and that as a result the older values, institutions, and personal characteristics necessary in order to get us to where we are have lost much of their vitality, especially for the more affluent, ethical, and dissenting minority of today's students.

I began by asking why growing numbers of students—an important mi-

nority—when they come to examine their relationship to the existing society, conclude that existing institutions and values are not worthy of respect, obedience, fidelity, and sacrifice. There are many local reasons for this, and I do not mean to minimize their importance by a mere global analysis. But local factors are catalytic today because they occur in a context where the apparent success of the older institutions and values has exhausted them. Modern societies are losing their capacity to inspire in the most affluent, idealistic, and talented youth that implicit sense of allegiance, fidelity, and moral respect which was the basis of more stable social orders. Thus, I suspect that historians of future eras may judge that, for all of their boisterousness and occasional destructiveness, today's dissenting students were right in pointing to the need for a radical restructuring of our society and its institutions.